Considering the Conventions: The Importance of WAC

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**INTRODUCTION**

I’ve recently found myself wondering how the trend for students to dread writing assignments came about. Was there ever a time in which students were eager to complete a research paper or even just a short story? If so, what changed? Why do so many students nowadays despise one of the most useful techniques for learning in existence?

Students in grade school are often only assigned writing from their English teachers. This means that students who continue to college and want to pursue a career in other fields besides English are more likely to be surprised by the type of thinking they will be challenged to do. Could this mean that these students studying fields which are less associated with typical English-class writing are at a disadvantage? In answering this, the conventions of writing for each field must first be examined in order to determine how different they really are from the English conventions that students are raised on.

I decided to examine three fields in three different disciplines which I feel are all significantly different in their conventions. I chose to examine English conventions, which fall in the Humanities discipline, in order to represent what students are often taught more than any other field. I chose to examine Biology because it falls under the discipline of natural Sciences which I feel is typically less associated with typical English-class writing. I chose to examine Psychology because I feel that the discipline of Social Sciences has aspects of both Humanities and Natural Sciences. In order to compare these fields, one must consider the conventions of language, structure, and reference.

Conventions of language are the ways in which members of a disciplinary community communicate their ideas using things like voice and point of view. Conventions of structure are the rules that constitute the way that a writing is laid out. Conventions of Reference are the ways in which one must go about using and crediting others information. These conventions are important in considering WAC because each discipline has different conventions.

**LANGUAGE**

The manner in which ideas are conveyed plays a major role in how they are perceived by specific audiences. Different disciplines have different audiences, so they also have different language conventions. In examining biology, nursing and psychology’s language conventions, the three had more differences than similarities. The one similarity I found was that each of them heavily emphasizes the importance of word choice. As the disciplines relate to specific scientific information, it is essential that all information is factually correct. Booth (1996) asserts that it is the role of the writer to ensure that the writing is absolutely clear enough for the expected audience. Booth also specifies that for nursing “Words must be selected carefully and abbreviations avoided.” Psychology and biology, though, provide more room for interpretation of information and more relaxed writing conventions than nursing does. Psychology and biology writings, for example, often includes hedging to prevent making broad claims (Miller-Cochran et al., 2019). Scientists still have much to discover within their field, and much of the information being discussed and researched currently has not yet been established as fact. Therefore, they must ensure that they do not imply their recent discoveries to be facts which would overstep their boundaries (Miller-Cochran et al., 2019). Additionally, Psychologists and biologists also do not mind being wordier in their writing whereas nurses need to be clear and concise. These two often use passive voice when writing which other disciplines tend to avoid as it is less direct. In sciences, though, using passive voice focuses attention on the object being studied instead of the researcher which helps create a more objective viewpoint (Miller-Cochran et al., 2019). Wyatt et al. (2015) gives an example in the write up of their study in saying, “A property of zebra fish which can be viewed…” instead of ‘One may view a. property of the zebra fish which…” because the latter draws more attention to the viewer instead of the fish. Nurses do not have to remove themselves from the situations in which they write about because they themselves are a critical part of the situation. Nursing conventions also urge the use of active voice because “Imposing words or complex sentences get in the way of intended thought” (Booth, 1996).

**STRUCTURE**

In terms of structure, the three selected disciplines have much in common. Each of them utilizes essays to reflect on new information and to analyze results of research. According to Miller-Cochran et al. (2019), Booth (1996), and Knisely (2004), the structure in these essays are relatively the same. Many of the essays in Psychology and Biology use the IMRaD format which divides the paper up into the different steps of describing and analyzing information (Miller-Cochran et al., 2019). In conducting my own research, I have found that many Biology essays also follow a similar format, including the example article by Wyatt et al. (2015). In addition, Psychology and biology both also use graphs quite often to analyze data. Both example articles, by Wyatt et al. (2015) and Tiliouine (2019), employ graphs. Miller- Cochran et al. (2019) provides more information about the use of graphs in Psychology saying that “Researchers use *figures* when they want to highlight the results of research…” Although nursing does not usually have the use of graphs in common with the other two disciplines, the three do all share that they often have abstracts, which “provide a brief overview of the study…” including the topic, purpose, and statement about the results. Two of my example articles, Tiliouine (2019) and Wyatt et al. (2015), and one of my research articles, Booth (1996), include abstracts.

**REFERENCE**

Referencing makes or breaks a paper, and there are so many different formats for listing reference that it seems as though each discipline must use a different one. Luckily, that is not the case. In fact, psychology, biology, and nursing all usually have their writings formatted to APA (Miller- Cochran et al, 2019) (Writing Guide for Nurses, 2020). Each situation, though, calls for a special type of writing and formatting. In terms of referencing co-writers, biology has the strictest rules. Miller-Cochran et al. provides support to this claim by saying, “often they provide a list, prominently, of the names of individuals who contributed…” The example writing chosen to represent biology (Wyatt et al., 2015) does exactly this. The names of the three authors are displayed just below the titles along with their accreditations. Psychology follows some unique patterns of format, as well. Psychology, for example, substitutes paraphrase in place of direct quotes much more often than writings other disciplines. This is because in some, like humanities, exact language is essential for the understanding of a source. In psychology, the data being described is much more important than the manner in which it is described (Miller-Cochran et al., 2019). In the example writing, (Tiliouine, 2019), There are five in-text citations on the first page with only one phrase quoted and the word ‘wellbeing’ quoted twice within a paraphrase. This serves as proof that paraphrasing is just as (if not more) common in psychology writings as direct quotes. Although nursing has a variety of types of writing within the discipline, most sources are referenced normally in APA with as much objectivity and conciseness as possible in the references.

**DISCUSSION**

In analyzing and comparing my sources, I have come to realize how different areas of study have very different experiences in terms of education. Obviously, there are different subject matters in the different disciplines, but one who desires to become an active member of a discipline must be educated in how an active member should contribute to the community. I have decided that each individual who enters the study of a new discipline is comparable to someone who is preparing to attend a gathering of a different social class or nationality. In order to meaningfully contribute to any conversation that would take place at the gathering, one must first understand the way to present their ideas so that the others will acknowledge and maybe accept them. This research also supports the idea that writing is a universal tool, not just to English classes, which can strongly contribute to students’ understanding. I believe, though, that the most important idea to be taken away from this research is that students who are *not* using writing as a means of learning are at a disadvantage. There is enough evidence proving that this method works and that it isn’t even difficult. In fact, in many cases writing assignments give students an opportunity to rest their brains by freely thinking about new information in a way that makes the most sense to them.

I also believe that it would be helpful for students and educators to have a better understanding of how writing will be incorporated into their learning. I think that studies of the types of writing professors of different disciplines do could help universities find a way to create more modern, critical-thinking inclusive courses. The biggest problem in the world of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) is that not enough educators are taking on the challenge of adapting the way they teach. Universities should examine the types of writing being done as well as research which types of writing are the most effective for learning within each discipline in order to give students the best education possible.

**METHODS**

Being tasked with researching and gaining an understanding WAC initially did not seem to me like something I would truly benefit from. I entered this assignment under the impression that I would be writing an article for a good grade. Oddly enough, my research has taught me exactly why one should not take that approach to writing assignments. Each of my sources provided me with information that further proved to me that writing is an essential part of learning.

What especially contributed to my change of heart was the evidence from each discipline. Learning the different ways in which people across different disciplines have adapted to use writing to their advantage is incredible. I chose the field of Biology as a prime example of a field which is not typically associated with much writing, but the articles by Knisely (2004) and Wyatt et al. (2015) show that information conveyed by their specific writings are important for understanding and transferring information and ideas.

Psychology I chose to examine because I am a Psychology major and because it seems to be roughly in the middle in terms of association with writing. Psychology is like the sciences in its writings in terms of working through hypotheses, research, and evidence. However, it is also like the Humanities in terms of studying people, emotions, and behaviors.

English I chose to examine as a sort of baseline. Typical English-class writing is what most people associate with writing assignments, so I wanted to compare this type of writing to the disciplines with different concentrations. These comparisons were interesting, though, because although Biology is typically less associated with writing, it has stricter language and structure conventions than Psychology in some cases, which is typically more associated with writing.

In analyzing my sources, I first skimmed them in order to understand the main ideas. I then reread them, highlighting important words or phrases that I wanted to discuss in my article. I also wrote notes connecting the evidence from the articles together. Initially when I approach articles, I read them like a magazine, looking for things in bold or that stand out. It is not until the second or third time going through an article that I fully comprehend the message to a point where I feel that I can speak on it. I was looking for sources that provided enough specific information about the conventions of each field that I could compare and contrast them I knew that my approach for my references would be to have one article that discusses the conventions and one article that exemplifies these conventions for each field because I thought it would provide the clearest explanation.. Many sources only provide information on language, structure, or references, and I wanted to know about all three. I analyzed my sources as I read through them, and I knew what I wanted to say by the time I had finished preparing them.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Writing across the curriculum (WAC) is a term created by James Britton in the 1970’s in order to grab the attention of educators (Stock 1986). Britton and his colleagues conducted research at the University of London’s Institute of Education in which they found that writing is a very powerful method of learning. Calling this idea of integrating writing into all subject matter in schools “Writing across the curriculum” was meant to get instructors interested and excited to try new methods with their students. Since Britton’s work, WAC has spread as a mode of learning as the need for improved literacy skills has become more and more prevalent.

McLeod’s (1987) article addresses the existence of a “student literacy crisis”. McLeod, as a professor, declares that writing skills of university students are not nearly at the level it once was. Kinneavy (1983) adds evidence to this claim by pointing out that regressions in writing skills have been documented by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and several tests, such as the SAT and ACT, have experienced a decline in scores over the last twenty years as well. McLeod proposes and explains how WAC is a solution to the crisis. She asserts that WAC, when used correctly, implements university-wide change to learning that educates both faculty and students in a new way. WAC is a way to turn students from passive to active learners. Allowing students to find a way to reason through information in a way that makes sense to them increases comprehension.

Proponents of WAC work to convey the idea that teachers of all subjects can utilize reading and writing in their lessons without necessarily having the responsibilities of English teachers. Stock (1986) explains how WAC is not meant to assign all educators the job of checking grammar and sentence structure, but instead it is just to inspire their students to write in some way, even imperfectly. This change also requires teachers to think creatively and adapt new ways to teach and have students work with information. Bethel (2005) gives the example of Janet Hartman, a professor of computer science, who accepted this challenge and developed a system in which she had her students write micro-essays on notecards. This assignment tasked students with deciding the most important information to include in such a small essay as well as how to go about explaining the new information. Adaptations such as this one not only confronts students *and* educators with more creative ways of thinking, but they also make learning more dynamic and interesting.

The identity that writing has taken on in recent years may attribute to the deterioration of the new generation’s writing ability. Students have stopped enjoying reading and writing and now see it as a chore. The standardization of learning has taught today’s students how to write in a specific structure and speak a certain way to convey an idea “correctly”. The lack of creative freedom in writing combined with the lack of variation in reading makes literature appear boring and chore-like when adolescents once turned to literature for a fun escape to a mundane reality. WAC provides the means to create a more diverse way of learning to read and write which in turn may excite the minds of students whom have only read and wrote the same kinds of works throughout their education. For example, a biology professor was curious about WAC and the effects that journal-keeping would have on his students, so he offered classes with journaling assignments and classes without. Initially, the classes involving writing had much fewer students enrolled than those without, but this outcome soon flipped (Bethel 2005). Students began to see the value that being able to freely form connections between new concepts through their own words really helped their understanding. There are two philosophical bases off of which WAC stands: the idea that writing is a new way to think and learn and that writing in a scholarly manner is like a conversation which has social parameters (McLeod 1987). Once a student understands the language of writing within a certain discipline, they may enter the conversation.

This begs the question: how do students *learn* the language of a discipline? McLeod (1987) begins to answer this question by stating that writing exists as a form of communication in academic communities and it is the role of the instructor to introduce their students to the community and educate them on what ways of writing are acceptable in their respective communities. Without WAC, students who are not pursuing degrees in less writing-centered fields are at a disadvantage. Kinneavy (1983) further supports this idea by asserting that if all schools and universities do not integrate WAC into their curriculums, students without it will be at a disadvantage. He even goes so far as to suggest that government involvement is necessary in order to provide the best opportunities for all. There are, however, educators who are less than confident in their writing abilities and who do not see themselves fit to assign and grade writing. Stock (1986) assures that perfect grammar and formatting knowledge isn’t necessary for WAC. She explains that it is better, in fact, to allow students to write without criticizing these types of things. WAC is all about using writing to find new ways of thinking about information, and a misplaces comma won’t ruin that.

WAC has been proven through trails across all levels of education to be a highly effective mode of learning. Writing should be used to learn in all disciplines as students studying fields that are usually not inclusive of writing are at a disadvantage for learning. Teachers should not be discouraged to teach by using writing if they fear their writing skills are less than perfect because the point of WAC is not to write perfectly, but the goal is instead to write to perfectly understand. As the educational system continues to evolve, proponents of WAC may hope that the desire for it will grow.

Resources

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